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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR MEETS WITH MIN OF JUSTICE - TRYING TO DO
SOMETHING WITH NOTHING

REFTEL: CONAKRY 1207

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. The Minister of Justice discussed her ministry's needs with the Ambassador at a meeting held November 20. The Minister emphasized ongoing difficulties with implementation of her program due to lack of funding and the difficulties with human rights abuses in prisons. She also discussed the Mamadou Sylla embezzlement case. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) On November 20, the Ambassador and Econoff met with Minister of Justice, Mme. Paulette Kourouma. The purpose of the courtesy call was to stress issues of importance to the United States, and to convey support for her ongoing effort to improve the Guinean justice system. The discussions were cordial with the Minister repeatedly emphasizing her ministry's needs. However, her comments were somewhat stilted perhaps due to the presence of lower ranking members of the Ministry of Justice. In any event, the Minister seemed reticent to discuss non-budgetary issues, such as the court case against Conte crony, Mamadou Sylla. The other attendees to the meeting included, Secretary General, Mr. Sekou Keita, Inspector General, Mr. Mouhamed Saed Haydara, Public Prosecutor, Mr. Yves Alphonse Aboly, and National Director of Prison Administration, Mr. Nabi Youssouf Sylla.

DESPERATE FOR RESOURCES

¶3. (SBU) The Minister was eager to discuss Guinea's substantial challenges to an effective justice system. She freely admitted that ministry needs assistance in every sense possible. As an example, she stated that the Ministry does not have its own official vehicles for the transport of prisoners from the jail to court; therefore, officials must rent cars with their own money in order to transport prisoners. Much as in her earlier meeting with Poloff, (reftel), Mme. Kourouma detailed a long list of ministry needs: vehicles, computers, solar panels, and new judicial robes. She also complained that the current budget for the Ministry of Justice was but 0.5% of government spending. She compared that with the USD 900 million that the State of New York pays just for its prison system. (NOTE: The proposed 2008 Budget increases the Ministry of Justice budget by 31%, to approximately USD 2.1 million; however, this is less than 0.3% of total 2008 proposed government spending. END NOTE.)

¶4. (SBU) Minister Kourouma reiterated her key program priorities (reftel): hiring of additional judges, increasing the Ministry's overall budget and individual salaries, improving prison conditions, pushing the National Commission of Investigation forward, and the Children's Code. She informed the Ambassador that the proposed Children's Code has been submitted to the National Assembly, as well as proposed laws on money laundering and terrorism. The Minister estimated about USD 500,000 is needed to start the Commission of Investigation into human rights abuses committed during the

January/February strikes, which she asked the U.S. to provide.

CHEAP JUSTICE

15. (SBU) With respect to judges' salaries, the Minister stated that the average salary is currently approximately USD 140 per month. She alleged that this low salary is behind many corruption complaints, and that she hoped to increase the salary to USD 500 per month. She also stated that 90 judges were currently undergoing a workshop in ethics.

HUMAN RIGHTS TRAINING FOR PRISON GUARDS

16. (SBU) Minister Kourouma noted the weak protection of human rights in Guinea's prisons, but said that the main cause is that all guards are not paid by her Ministry. She alleged that the Ministry has little control over the behavior of the unofficial 'volunteers' who are paid directly by the prison directors to augment the official guards. Nevertheless, she asserted that human rights training was urgently needed. The Minister also said that she wanted 600 new prison guards to be trained, without specifying who would pay for the new guards.

MAMADOU SYLLA: CRIMINAL OR CIVIL PROSECUTION?

17. (SBU) The Minister of Justice was noticeably less forthcoming when the Ambassador asked about the current status of the legal proceedings against Conte crony, Mamadou Sylla. In an earlier

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meeting with Poloff (reftel), the Minister had expressed her desire to follow through on the embezzlement case. However, in her meeting with the Ambassador, she alleged that Mr. Sylla should not be subject to criminal penalties, and that at most this was a business dispute, which at worst meant a fine of some type.

18. (SBU) Mme. Kourouma stated that the only pressure she is getting regarding Mr. Sylla's case is from the public. She asserted that no one in the government is pressuring her, but instead, it is the public who is demanding prison time for the self-described 'richest man' in Guinea. The Minister reminded the Ambassador that Mr. Sylla is a friend of President Conte, and then she made a fleeting reference to undisclosed 'technical problems' and errors in the file that are slowing down the case against Mr. Sylla.

19. (SBU) COMMENT. Minister Kourouma's comments seemed to be constrained in the presence of co-workers who are holdovers from previous governments and not part of the new reform government. Her handling of the Mamadou Sylla case is of concern as it appears she may be backing off on prosecution of the embezzlement charges. Given the public perception of Mr. Sylla as a symbol of corruption in Guinea, any special treatment could spark public ire, even civil unrest. Meanwhile, government officials say they are moving forward on the Commission of Investigation yet continue to plead for donor resources despite having received funds from the EU and UNDP in excess of 250,000 USD, suggesting a lack of will rather than funds as a principal constraint.

CARTER